# The Selection of Academic Role Models by First Year University Students

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**ABSTRACT** The throughput rates of South African universities have been on the agenda of government and educational institutions for quite a while now. One of the factors that could impact university throughput rates positively is the influence of academic role models. Research has shown that adult role models sharing the same sex, race and/or age with the student could boost their academic performance. In light of this, this study aimed at exploring the differences between groups of first year sociology students at a South African urban university with regard to the criteria they use to select academic role models. The study was conducted at its main campus in 2011. A quantitative research methodology in the form of a self-administered survey was employed. It was found that the sociology first year students at the South African university considered academic qualifications/standing to be the most important criterion when selecting an academic role model compared to age and other socially ascribed statuses like race and sex. The findings of this study therefore diverge from the mainstream findings in the field of role models. This finding implies that the exclusive emphasis on making equity appointments within tertiary institutions in order to establish credible academic role models for university students should be revisited to make provision for a more complex approach, which goes beyond the focus on ascribed status.

## INTRODUCTION

South Africa's university graduation rate has been on the decline. The Department of Education in 2005 (in Letseka and Maile 2008: 5) noted that of the 120 000 students who enrolled in higher education in 2000, 30% (n= 36 000) dropped out in their first year of study; 20% (n= 24 000) in their second and third years of study; of the remaining 20%, (n= 12 000) graduated within the specified 3 year duration for a general Bachelor's degree. The Department of Education (2011: 10) noted that this South African university had a graduation rate of 20% for undergraduate degree and diplomas.

In response to the decline in the graduation rate, the South African Ministry of Tertiary and Higher Education devoted R12-billion for the 2010-11 period for further education and training, with an additional R1.3- billion set aside to improve the salaries of educators in this sector over the coming three years (South Africa Yearbook 2010/11). Allocations to South Africa's higher educational institutions grew from R7.1-billion in 2001/02 to R15.3-billion for 2010/11 (allAfrica.com 2010). In spite of this, the cycle of dropouts created continues and it will trap the generations to come in poverty. Many students who come from the previously disadvantaged groups do not have adequate support at home or in their communities. South Africa's tertiary and higher education institutions are receiving immense pressure from the government to increase their throughput rates. The state has recently been battling to assist underprivileged higher students "from poor and working class households" to fund their education through National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NS-FAS) loans and bursaries (PoliticsWeb 2014), despite drastic efforts that have led to the budget for NSFAS more than tripling from 3.1 billion to over R9 billion between 2009-2014.

First-year university students are in a transitional period. Students are moving from being adolescents to young adults. It is a period characterised by the strengthening of non-filial relationships. Erickson (in Scharf and Mayseless 2001: 379) posits that identity formation is a central focus in this transitional period and both adolescents and young adults are likely to be influenced by adults within their environment. The adult influences can both be positive and negative, whilst some adults tend to be more influential than others. Role models influence individuals' academic and career decision (Karunanayake and Nauta 2004: 226). In light of

this, academic role models can play a very crucial part in the academic success of students (Hurd et al. 2009: 777). Research has demonstrated that adolescents with role models not only report a stronger ethnic identity and possess a higher self-esteem, they also receive higher grades than their colleagues who do not have role models (Williams 1980: 319-320; Yancey et al. 2002: 60; Gibson 2003: 59; Karunanayake and Nauta 2004: 226; McLean 2004: 133; Hurd et al. 2009: 778).In line with this finding, McLean (2004: 133) in a study done in South Africa at a medical school noted that role models had a positive influence on the career paths and academic success of medical students.

In light of the above, it was therefore important to ask the question, "Are there differences in the way groups of first-year sociology students at an urban South African university select academic role models?" This study investigated what selection criteria first-year Sociology students at the urban South African university use in the selection of academic role models

## Review of Literature on the Selection of Role Models

*The wise man should always follow the roads that have been trodden by the great, and imitate those who have most excelled, so that if he cannot reach perfection, he may at least acquire something of its saviour. (Machiavelli 1995)*

### Role Models

The concept "role model" has been defined by various scholars. Filstad et al. (2007: 74) define role models as individuals whose behaviour provides a pattern or model from which others want to learn. Shapiro et al. (1978: 52) define role models as "individuals whose behaviours, personal and styles and personal attributes are emulated by others." Murrell and Zagenczyk (2006: 562) offer a more intricate definition of a role model and define one as a "cognitive construction based on the attributes of people in social roles that an individual perceives to be similar to in terms of attitudes, behaviours, goals, or status position to him or herself to some extent and desires to increase perceived similarity by emulating those attributes." This definition evidently suggests that role models are people who are similar to the self and thus, the individual is able to learn from, is motivated, by and is able to define his/her sense of self by connecting with these role models. These definitions suggest that the individual wants to be like the role model, and thus it is the qualities that the individual gains inspiration from and wants to emulate. From these definitions it is evident that role models serve as characters that individuals aspire to be like and are considered as reference points. Role models often provide "a template of behaviours that are needed to achieve such success" (Lockwood 2009: 36).

The role model serves as an object of admiration, emulation and respect. Role models have been shown as a way to inculcate professional values, attitudes, and behaviours in students and young professionals (Paice et al. 2005: 707). Role models have distinctly different levels of involvement as compared to behavioural models, advisers and mentors. Gibson (2003: 593) argues that behavioural models are figures who are observed by individuals in order to learn particular actions and attitudes (Gibson 2003: 593). He posits that role models are observed for broader aspects of a social role rather than more limited task skills, and typically involve greater emotional involvement by the individual (Gibson 2003: 593). Advisers assist individuals with making "sound decisions and choices while promoting intellectual development" (Whelley et al. 2003: 42). Whelley et al. (2003: 42) go on to say that the level of trust in the adviser must nevertheless be such that the adviser not only knows what to suggest, but also that the person with whom they are working will accept their guidance. Levinson et al. (1991: 423) define a mentor as an adviser whose guidance focuses on professional issues. In contrast, role models may provide an example in a broader context that includes the professional aspects of life. Thus mentors can be considered to be "older, wiser, friends, who are available at informal times to talk, and exchange advice and counsel" (Whelley et al. 2003: 42). Whelley et al. (2003: 42) postulate that advisers are closely aligned to role models.

According to Gibson (1996: 702), the term role model draws on two theoretical constructs. The first is the concept of role, and the tendency of individuals to identify with other people occupying important social positions. The second is the concept of modelling: the psycho-

logical matching of cognitive skills and patterns of behaviour between a person and an observing individual. These two aspects of role models reflect two different theoretical traditions. The first, role identification theories, emphasise the notion that individuals are attracted to people based on similarity. They may perceive similarity in terms of attitudes, behaviours, goals, or a desired status position, and they are motivated to enhance that similarity through observation and emulation. The second, modelling or social learning theories, suggest that individuals attend to models because they can be helpful in learning new tasks, skills and norms. Identification theories place relatively more emphasis on the motivational and self-definitional aspects of role models, while modelling theories emphasise the learning aspects.

According to Perry and Nixon (2005: 26), Bandura, the developer of the Social Learning Theory, constructed it around the idea that much of learning in life is vicarious learning, or learning by modelling. The Social Learning Theory identifies four factors that influence learning: firstly, the fact that human beings have the capability of learning or changing behaviour; secondly, that specific behaviour yields a specific outcome; thirdly, a belief that human beings can successfully carry out and maintain behaviour and, fourthly, role models obtain positive results that are available from the particular activity to be learnt. There is a continuum of support offered by the role model ranging from those having no intent of being a role model with minimal interaction to those who are fully aware and commit time to being a role model. From the above analysis of role models, it can be concluded that an academic role model can play a critical role in the academic success and career development of students.

**The Influence of Role Models**

There are a variety of ways in which role models impact the lives of people (Filstad et al. 2007: 73). Having role models is important to any individual's growth and development because they serve as a source of learning, motivation, self-definition and career guidance (Murrell and Zagenczyk 2006: 561.) According to Gibson (2003: 591), role models have a crucial purpose in early career socialisation by helping individuals create, and experiment with, their self-concept. Murrell and Zagenczyk (2006: 561) posit that role models are important sources of instrumental and social support throughout one's career development, which Whelley et al. (2003: 43) refers to as a "social function." Looking at the South African case, and the legacy of apartheid, one is inclined to concur with Erkut and Mokros (1984) who conducted a study in the UK on how professors can function as role models. They argue that role models can play a significant role for minority individuals' career development because a history of discrimination and limited career options may have decreased their self-efficacy and outcome expectations, leading to some minorities lower educational and career aspirations (Erkut and Mokros 1984: 400). Role models, therefore, serve as a source of inspiration (Lockwood and Kunda 1997: 93; Gibson 2006: 701). Hurd et al. (2009: 777) suggest that people tend to display behaviours that are learnt either intentionally or unintentionally, through the influence of example.

**Factors Considered in Role Model Selection**

A role model is an individual's social construct. Role models are informally selected (Murrell and Zagenczyk 2006: 562). Gibson (2003: 591) notes that most studies done on role models in the United States focus on what the role models do for the individuals, examining the process and strategies of behavioural modelling or the functions the role model could provide. He asserts that when individuals are motivated to self-improve, learn a new role, acquire new skills, or set goals, they may select social referents who inhabit these roles or exhibit these desired qualities (Gibson 2003: 592). In studies done in the United States, it was evident that role models are selected according to different criteria (Williams 1980; Gilbert 1985; Gibson 2003; Murrell and Zagenczyk 2006). Gilbert (1985: 113) argues that role models possess characteristics both personal and professional, which are crucial to the establishment of the role model-individual relationship. From the existing literature, role models were selected based on firstly, the notion of "salient others". There is an assumption that "salient others," or "outstanding role models," epitomise possible goals which individuals are thought to attend to early in life and career (Williams 1980: 319-320; Lockwood 2009: 36). Role models occupy the prominent posi-

tions of teachers, mentors and supervisors. However, individuals may also have a "range of models outside these categories" (Gibson 2003: 591).

A second factor has to do with proximity to the role model. The social context can make role models more or less available. The environment can "impose" role models, and these can include parents, peers and supervisors (Gibson 2003: 592). Parents have the most influence over their adolescent children in areas of school, career orientation and planning for the future (Hurd et al. 2009: 779). When adolescents and young adults enter the learning or working environment, they might identify new individuals who might serve as role models. In a working environment, colleagues can be taken as role models and in a university setting, lecturers and supervisors can be taken as role models. If the individual fails to identify a role model, the parent will remain the dominant role model (Mclean 2004: 137). This has also been evident in research on ethnic minorities in which the children tend to have parental role models (Yancey et al. 2002: 56).

The perception of similarity between the individual and the role model is a third important factor. Bandura (1977) claims in selecting role models, individuals choose those they view to be similar to themselves with regard to some obvious characteristics. This is based on the premise that they assume that the role models' experiences would apply to their own life as well. The characteristics include similar demographic and psychological dimensions such as race[1], sex/gender, ethnicity, age, lifestyle, education, attitudes, behaviours, goals, values and/ attitudes and social characteristics like experience, social location, background, status and class (Williams 1980: 316; Erkut and Mokros 1984: 400; Gibson 2003: 592; Bricheno and Thornton 2007: 384; Filstad et al. 2007: 77; Buck et al. 2008: 690; Lockwood 2009: 37). Role models are essentially living evidence that certain achievements are possible, and serve as models for emulation in achieving certain social positions. Williams (1980: 319) supports this by establishing through research that exceptional academic achievers understood themselves to be more similar to their liked school personnel than did low achievers, and that the former identify with their school personnel more often than with their parents.

The literature also shows that students' academic and professional development has been increased by the presence of same race- and gender-role models (Gilbert et al. 1983; Zirkel 2002; Karunanayake and Nauta 2004; Murrell and Zagenczyk 2006; Hurd et al. 2009). "Role model matching" (matching the individual to the model in terms of specific statuses) centred on race and gender has an important impact on the individual-role model relationship. Youth learn the racial and gendered structuring of the culture which they operate in by noting race and gender of adults in different professional positions. The presence or absence of "like others" in different positions implicitly conveys information to young people about their future possibilities (Zirkel 2002: 357).

An important form of role model matching is race matching. Karunanayake and Nauta (2004: 230) found that the majority of career role models identified by students in their study were of their own race. Minority students generally have a limited number of role models of their race, and matching them with ones of the same race has a positive effect on their performance (Buck et al. 2008: 689-691). Lockwood (2009: 36) encapsulates this when he declares that, "[w]hen members of minority or disadvantaged groups achieve success, they are often expected to serve as role models for other members of their group: An African American surgeon will inspire African American youths to believe that they too can achieve professional success; a female astrophysicist will encourage young women to pursue non-traditional careers in science." Therefore, seeing others from previously disadvantaged racial groups and backgrounds succeed, gives students hope and courage that they too could get ahead (Gibson 2003).

A second important form of role model matching is gender matching. Since men have traditionally outnumbered women in the workplace, women are mostly likely to benefit from the example of a female professional who provides evidence that females can achieve success (Lockwood 2009: 37). This is because successful female figures function as inspirational, and they convey the idea that success is achievable by all females. Female role models also demonstrate that it is possible to overcome patriarchal ideologies and gender stereotypes, indicating to other women that success is attainable.

Wiest (2009) argues that female high school and college students studying mathematics need to be exposed to female role models through inviting female guest speakers to address classes, showing "films about female mathematicians" and "[infusing] information about women mathematicians and their work into relevant course content" (Wiest 2009: 163). In looking at the role models influence on the educational attainment of "young women," Nixon and Robinson (1999: 192) found that the educational attainment of female students is positively and significantly correlated with the percentage of faculty and professional staff at their high school who are female, although the magnitude of the effect is relatively small.

Fourthly, it is also important to consider the extent to which peers are selected as role models. Educators, parents, and other professionals note that a key to successfully integrating isolated students into an academic environment is to create informal peer support and friendships (Burgstahler et al. 1997: 12). Peers can become the students' role models by offering advice, friendship and information, promoting their sense of belonging and empowering one another (Burgstahler et al. 1997: 13). This can also contribute immensely to students' academic success. Students can discover their potential to participate in academic opportunities by interacting with others with similar challenges who are pursuing academic studies they might have thought impossible for themselves. In looking at minority students in a university setting, Ortiz and Santos (2010: 5) argue that same-ethnic peers not only help students to feel like they belong, but they also serve as role models. Burgstahler et al. (1997: 13) argue that peers are more often accessible and are easier to find than mentors and adult role models. Role models possess characteristics, both professional and personal, which are important to the establishment of the individual/ role model relationship. While the predominant line of thought has been that role models are adults, the current study will assess the notion that some students actually select their peers (friends) to be their role models.

Burgstahler et al. (1997: 13) claim that peer support groups as role models play a very pivotal role in the academic success of students with challenges. Peer support groups provide a blend of people with various skills and needs and give each member opportunities to act as a mentor, a "helper" or role model (Burgstahler et al. 1997: 13). In relation to this, Murrell and Zagenczyk (2006: 571) noted that female role models were judged by more peers to be sources of advice, than male role models. Peers are more accessible and easier to find than adults. Burgstahler et al. (1997: 20) argue that peer role models function as tutors and inspirational figures who share their academic success and talents with the other students. Peer role models can contribute immensely to academic success as they afford flexibility, support and efficiency.

Seeing others from previously disadvantaged backgrounds (and often English second language students) progress; gives others hope and courage that they too might succeed (Gibson 2003: 138). Gibson goes on to say that this issue of "survival" might thus become of paramount importance amongst these students, even more so than recognising role models whose behaviour epitomises an understanding and caring doctor-patient relationship.

## METHODOLOGY

The research questions of this study related to (1) the types of role models selected by first-year sociology students; (2) the criteria used by first-year sociology students to select particular role models; and the differences evident in the choice of role models when compared on the basis of race and gender. A quantitative research methodology was employed with a self-administered questionnaire being distributed electronically to all the first-year sociology students at the university. The students were given a Survey Monkey link where the questionnaire was posted. Since the questionnaire was online, students had an opportunity to complete it irrespective of time and distance. The questionnaire was availed to the students in mid-August, 2011, for a period of two weeks.

The questionnaire included an introduction highlighting the nature of the study and the reasons for the study. It consisted of closed-ended questions and was divided into two sections. Section 1 consisted of biographical questions which dealt with age, sex and race. Section 2 consisted of questions dealing with their use and selection of academic role models. They were first asked to indicate how important they consider age, race, sex and academic qualifications as selection criteria, followed by a request

to rank these criteria in order of importance in the selection of role models.

The questionnaire was piloted prior to it being distributed to the respondents. This involved requesting 200 undergraduate students who were not first-year sociology students to complete the questionnaire. Problem questions were identified, modified and this attributed to improving the questionnaire. The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 18).

## Profile of Respondents

A total of 210 of the 1210 students responded.  This gives a response rate of 17.3% which is fairly low and indicates that the findings should be handled with caution. It was therefore important to determine whether the sample could be considered representative of the population with regard to gender and race. The majority of students in the sample were female at 73.8% (n= 155) and the males at 26.2% (n= 55) as is shown in Table 1. The uneven distribution can be attributed to the male/female ratio within the Department of Sociology itself. The first-year Sociology class was 71.7% (n= 867) female and 28.3% (n= 343) male (Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) 2011). The racial distribution of the sample is reflected in Table 2.

**Table 1: Sex of the respondents**

|        | N   | %    |
|--------|-----|------|
| Male   | 55  | 26.2 |
| Female | 155 | 73.8 |
| Total  | 210 | 100  |

**Table 2: Racial composition of the sample**

|               | N   | %    |
|---------------|-----|------|
| Black African | 163 | 77.6 |
| White         | 34  | 16.2 |
| Coloured      | 9   | 4.3  |
| Indian/Asian  | 4   | 1.9  |
| Total         | 210 | 100  |

The majority were Black Africans[2], accounting for 77.6% (n= 163), followed by Whites who were 16.2% (n= 34) and Coloureds who were 4.3% (n= 9). Indians/Asians accounted for 1.9% (n= 4) of the total sample. The asymmetrical dis-

tribution is a result of the racial distribution in the Department of Sociology. In 2011 the Department had an enrolment of 77.0% Black African students and a White population of 13.8% registered for Sociology 1. The Indians and Coloureds combined accounted for 9.2% of the total population of first-year sociology students (Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) 2011). There was therefore a slight over representation of Black African and White students and an under representation of Indian and Coloured students in the current study.

Students were asked whether they had a significant academic role model. Table 3 illustrates their responses. An overwhelming 79% (n= 166) had role models. Less than a quarter (21%; n= 44) of the sample indicated that they did not have academic role models. Students were also asked who their most significant academic role model was, and Table 4 provides their responses.

**Table 3: Do you have a significant academic role model?**

|       | N   | %   |
|-------|-----|-----|
| Yes   | 166 | 79  |
| No    | 44  | 21  |
| Total | 210 | 100 |

**Table 4: Who is your most significant academic role model?**

|       | N   | %     |
|-------|-----|-------|
| Adult | 128 | 77.1  |
| Peer  | 38  | 22.9  |
| Total | 166 | 100.0 |

The majority of the first-year Sociology students who had role models indicated that their role model was an adult (77.1%, n= 128). Peer role models accounted for 22.9% (n= 38) of those who had academic role models. Table 5 illustrates the responses with regard to four criteria which the respondents had to rate in regard to the selection of an academic role model.

From Table 5 it was apparent that the majority of the first-year Sociology students at the university agreed that academic role models should be of a high academic standing (76.2%, n= 160). On race, a significant 72.9% (n= 153) believed that an academic role model need not

**Table 5: Criteria used in selecting academic role models**

| Your academic role model should be... | Strongly Disagree | | Disagree | | Unsure or Undecided | | Agree | | Strongly Agree | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | n | % | N | % | n | % | n | % |
| Of a high academic qualification/st anding | 20 | 9.5 | 15 | 7.1 | 15 | 7.1 | 60 | 28.6 | 100 | 47.7 | 210 | 100 |
| Older than you | 39 | 18.6 | 38 | 18.1 | 25 | 11.9 | 66 | 31.4 | 42 | 20.0 | 210 | 100 |
| Of the same sex | 82 | 39 | 51 | 24.3 | 25 | 11.9 | 27 | 12.9 | 25 | 11.9 | 210 | 100 |
| Of the same race | 107 | 51 | 46 | 21.9 | 20 | 9.5 | 22 | 10.5 | 15 | 7.1 | 210 | 100 |

be of the same race, and 71.9% (n=153) believed that the role model need not be of the same sex. This sentiment is also reflected in Table 6 where they were asked to rank the four criteria in order of importance.

In the selection criteria of an academic role model, an overwhelming 94.7% (n= 195) of the sample considered academic qualification/standing to be the most important criterion. 77.2% (n= 159) of the sample selected age to be the second most important criterion, whilst for the third most important, 64.7% (n= 130) selected sex. Race was considered the least important by 71.7% (n= 147). From this table, it is very clear that academic qualification/standing was the most important criterion in the selection of academic role models. Ascribed criteria like age and gender were considered of lesser importance, with race seen as the least important of the four criteria.

## RESULTS

Flowing from the review of literature, the following hypotheses were formulated. The Chi-square Test of Independence was used to test the hypotheses. A statistical significance level of 0.05 (that is a 95% confidence interval) was utilised.

### Hypothesis 1

*There is a significant difference between male and female students with regard to the importance of choosing an academic role model of the same sex as themselves.*

A Chi-square test of independence was performed and Table 7 was generated.

A p-value of 0.123 was obtained. Since it was greater than 0.05, there was statistically not

**Table 6: Ranking of academic role model selection criteria**

| I consider | Most important | | Second most important | | Third most important | | Least important | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | n | % | n | % | N | % |
| Academic qualifi- cation/ standing | 195 | 94.6 | 7 | 3.4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 |
| Age | 7 | 3.4 | 159 | 77.1 | 32 | 15.9 | 9 | 4.4 |
| Sex | 1 | 0.5 | 24 | 11.7 | 130 | 64.7 | 48 | 23.4 |
| Race | 3 | 1.5 | 16 | 7.8 | 37 | 18.4 | 147 | 71.7 |
| Total | 206 | 100 | 206 | 100 | 201 | 100 | 205 | 100 |
| Missing value | 4 | | 4 | | 9 | | 5 | |

**Table 7: Sex and selection of academic role model of same sex**

| | Disagree | | Unsure | | Agree | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | n | % | n | % |
| Male | 30 | 54.5 | 11 | 20 | 14 | 25.4 | 55 | 100 |
| Female | 103 | 66.4 | 14 | 9 | 38 | 24.6 | 155 | 100 |
| Total | 133 | 63.3 | 25 | 11.9 | 52 | 24.8 | 210 | 100 |

$\chi^2 = 7.257$; degrees of freedom = 4; p = 0.123

enough reason to reject the null-hypothesis. Therefore, there was no statistical indication that male and female first-year Sociology students at the university differ with regard to choosing an academic role model of the same sex as themselves.

## Hypothesis 2

*There is a significant difference between Black and White students with regard to the importance of choosing academic role models of the same race as themselves.*

The aim for this hypothesis was to make a comparison between the two largest racial groups, Black Africans and Whites. The race variable was recoded to exclude the relatively small proportion of Indian/Asian and Coloured respondents (6% combined) from the analysis. The responses were initially spread across five categories. Upon conducting the tests, more than 20% had an expected cell counted less than five. The variable was re-coded by combining strongly disagree and disagree into one category, and strongly agree and agree into one category. This provided the three categories of "disagree", "unsure" and "agree." Table 8 reflects the results.

In the end a p-value of 0.781 was obtained, which was bigger than 0.05. Hence, there was statistically not enough reason to reject the null-hypothesis. It was thus apparent that there was no statistically significant difference between Black African and White first-year Sociology students at the university with regard to the importance of having an academic role model of the same race.

## DISCUSSION

An interesting but expected finding was that an overwhelming 79% (n= 166) indicated that they had academic role models. Of those, only 22.8% (n=38) used their peers. This finding contradicts arguments in the literature that peers are often more accessible and are easier to find than mentors and adult role models (Burgstahler et al. 1997: 13).Peer role models seem to play a less important role in the current study.

According to Murrell and Zagenczyk's (2006: 564), role identification theories similarity between the role model and the individual, plays an important role in the establishment of the individual and role model relationship. The need for "role model matching" with regard to sex and race, among other factors, is demonstrated in the research by Williams (1980), Gibson (2003), Bricheno and Thornton (2007), Filstad et al. (2007), Buck et al. (2008), and Lockwood (2009). These theories argue that people are attracted to those that they believe are similar to themselves. Zirkel (2002: 357) in particular, argues that the presence or absence of "like others" in different positions implicitly conveys information to young people about their future possibilities.

In this study the focus was on the importance of four criteria in choosing a role model, namely age, race, sex and academic standing. Paradoxically in this study it was found that an overwhelming 93.8% (n= 197) of the sampled first-year Sociology students at the urban South African university considered academic qualification/ standing to be the most important criterion. A significant 75.7% (n= 159) of the sample selected age as the second most important criterion, whilst for the third most important, they selected sex (n=130; 64.7%). Race was considered the least important criterion by 71.7% of the sample (n=147). Furthermore, there was no significant difference between male and female students with regard to the importance of choosing an academic role model of the same sex. Additionally, there was no significant difference between Black African and White students when it comes to choosing a role model of the same race.

**Table 8: Race and selection of academic role model of same race**

|  | Disagree | | Unsure | | Agree | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | N | % | N | % | n | % | n | % |
| Black African | 115 | 70.6 | 17 | 10.4 | 31 | 19.0 | 163 | 100 |
| White | 26 | 76.5 | 3 | 8.8 | 5 | 14.7 | 34 | 100 |
| Total | 141 | 71.6 | 20 | 10.2 | 36 | 18.3 | 197 | 100 |

$\chi^2 = 0.495$; degrees of freedom = 2; p = 0.781

The selection of academic role models based on academic achievement/standing, contradicts studies by Gilbert et al. (1983), Zirkel (2002), Karunanayake and Nauta (2004), Murrell and Zagenczyk (2006) and Hurd et al. (2009), all of whom argue for gender- and race matching role models and individuals. Based on Williams (1980: 319-320), Gibson (2003: 591) and Lockwood (2009: 36), one is inclined to concur with them in the assumption that "salient others," or "outstanding role models," epitomise possible goals which individuals are thought to attend to early in life and career (Williams 1980: 319-320; Lockwood 2009: 36). It is on this assumption that academic role models are individuals who occupy the prominent positions of teachers, mentors and supervisors, though other categories may also play a role (Gibson 2003: 591). It could perhaps also be argued that proximity seems to play a more significant role in determining the selection of academic role models than race matching, seeing that Black African staff members were still underrepresented amongst the academic staff in the Faculty of Humanities at the time when the study was conducted. On the other hand, the same faculty tended to have an overrepresentation of female academics, which raises the question why gender matching did not play a more important role.

## CONCLUSION

In attempting to answer the question: "How do students select academic role models?", it was evident that the first-year Sociology students at the urban South African university were less likely to be influenced by ascribed status (race, age and sex) as they considered an achieved status - academic qualification - to be the most important criterion when selecting an academic role model. These results seem to imply that race and gender matching modelling have become less important as students now consider academic standing as the most significant factor in the selection of academic role models. As far as race matching is concerned, this could be due to proximity playing a more important role. However, this does not explain why gender matching did not feature more prominently. While this finding should not be interpreted as a justification for relaxing attempts to bolster equity appointments at universities, it provides some indication of the need for an equally strong emphasis on academic quality when making appointments, since students seem to consider ascribed statuses as less important when selecting academic role models.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As we have indicated before, the relatively small sample implies that our findings should be treated as a point of departure in the ongoing debate about the relative importance of various criteria in the selection of academic role models. We recommend that future research be conducted in which a more representative sample can be analysed so that the findings can be generalised. It also important that similar studies be done not only in different South African universities, but also institutions in different contexts.

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## NOTES

1. Race is a contested concept. The social construction of race, which justifies and legitimises the domination of one racial group by another, is particularly evident in a country like South Africa with its long history of racism and racial oppression.
2. For the purpose of this article, we employed the racial categories as indicated in the Employment Equity Act. We qualified the category of African as Black African, as White, Coloured and Indian respondents born on the African continent could also lay claim to the designation "African".

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